Frequently Asked Questions

Who is able to work with sea turtles?

Persons authorized to work with sea turtles and their nests have been trained and permitted to do so by both state and federal agencies. Authorized personnel carry a permit issued by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) and wear identifiable clothing.

How do you know a sea turtle has nested?

Sea turtles crawl from the water onto the beach, leaving tracks that resemble those of tractor tires. If they lay a nest, they will leave behind a body pit and a mound of "fluffy" sand disguising the location of their eggs. Occasionally a turtle will return to the water without laying a nest; this is known as a false crawl.

How are turtle nests marked?

Upon finding turtle tracks, volunteers mark the activity with flags. Permitted personnel locate the eggs and mark the nest with yellow stakes and flagging tape to keep it secure. A false crawl is marked with a large "X" through the tracks to indicate the crawl has been documented.

Are eggs ever relocated?

The STCRP only moves eggs if the nest is in imminent danger or washing out. Interference in the natural incubation and hatching process is kept to a minimum.

How do you know that a nest has hatched?

A circular depression in the staked off area and/or tiny hatchling tracks indicate a nest has hatched.

Why are there differences in incubation times?

Temperature influences incubation time. Temperature is dependent upon the sand color and grain size, rainfall and tidal activity. For example, a nest on a beach with dark, coarse sand and little rainfall will hatch sooner than a nest on a beach with light-colored, fine sand that has been inundated by water.



Frequently Asked Questions

What's the difference between a land turtle and a sea turtle?

Gopher tortoises and terrapins are also found on beaches and may be mistaken for sea turtles. One easy identifier is that sea turtles have flippers and land turtles have feet with nails. Land turtles can also pull their heads and limbs into their shells and sea turtles cannot. Even though they reside on the beach, land turtles do not go into the ocean.

What if I see a sea turtle nesting at night?

Watch in the dark, your eyes will adjust. Remain quiet and still and stay behind the turtle. Do not touch the turtle or encourage her to move. Do not use flashlights or take flash photographs. The flash could confuse the turtle and stop her from laying her eggs. Nesting turtles are still during most of the process and may take up to an hour to complete nesting. The STCRP will document the activity at dawn.

What if I see a sea turtle nesting in the daytime?

If you are certain it is a sea turtle, take photographs if possible (no flash please!) and call the STCRP immediately. Rare Kemp's ridley sea turtles are known to nest during the day.

What if I see a nest being inundated with water?

Nests can tolerate some water inundation and still hatch successfully. If there are no eggs exposed, there is no reason to take action. If eggs are exposed, call the STCRP for instructions.

What if I see hatchlings in danger?

If you find hatchlings that are not on the beach or are headed away from the ocean, call the STCRP for instructions. Put rescued hatchlings into a bucket with a layer of damp sand and cover the bucket with a towel. Do not put hatchlings in water or take them into air conditioning. Hatchlings heading towards the ocean should be left alone.

What if I see suspicious activity around a turtle or nest?

If you suspect that someone is tampering with a nest, harassing a turtle or has possession of a turtle or any of its parts, please call the FWC or the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office. Information can also be found on the signs posted on nests.

What if I find an injured or stranded sea turtle?

Call the Mote Strandings Investigations Program at (941) 988-0212.

EMERGENCY PHONE NUMBERS

FWC LAW ENFORCEMENT 1 (888) 404-3922

SARASOTA COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE (941) 316-1201

MOTE STRANDINGS INVESTIGATIONS PROGRAM (941) 988-0212

STCRP (941) 388-4331

Human-Induced Threats

BIOLOGISTS ESTIMATE that only one out of every 1,000 hatchlings survives to maturity. Combined with natural mortality, the following threats have caused a decline in the populations of all sea turtle species:

- Poaching by humans;
- Entanglement and drowning in fishing nets, longlines and discarded monofilament fishing line;
- Ingestion of harmful debris such as small plastic pieces, plastic bags, balloons, Styrofoam, tar and chemical pollutants;
- Injury from boat collisions;
- Barriers to nesting such as beach furniture and sea walls;
- Artificial lighting from condominiums, houses, commercial establishments, streetlights and sky glow can disorient hatchlings. Disoriented hatchlings exhaust energy reserves, are vulnerable to predators and may never reach the water.

You Can Help Sea Turtles!

DURING NESTING SEASON (May-October):

- Shield or turn off outdoor lights that are visible from the beach;
- Close drapes after dark;
- Remove furniture from the beach at night;
- Fill in holes and knock down sand castles that may entrap or block hatchlings;
- Place trash in its proper place;
- Do not use flashlights, fireworks, fishing lights or campfires on the beach.

ANYTIME:

- Contribute to marine conservation organizations like the STCRP at www.mote.org/seaturtles.
- Purchase a sea turtle license plate at www.helpingseaturtles.org.



Learn about sea turtles at www.seaturtle.org.





Sea Turtle Conservation & Research Program



Mote Marine Laboratory 1600 Ken Thompson Parkway Sarasota, FL 34236 (941) 388-4331 turtles@mote.org www.mote.org/seaturtles

Our Mission

MOTE MARINE LABORATORY is an independent, nonprofit organization dedicated to research and education in marine and environmental sciences. Our emphasis is on preserving, conserving and enhancing our natural resources.

The Sea Turtle Conservation & Research Program (STCRP) monitors sea turtle activity to learn more about their biology and behavior to help reduce the impacts of human activity. In addition, STCRP personnel protect nests from predators and other threats and document nest success. The data collected contributes to a statewide cooperative effort to monitor the status of sea turtles in Florida. 2011 marked the 30th year of STCRP conservation efforts, which included monitoring 52,000 turtle activities, protecting 1.5 million hatchlings and tagging 4,000 nesting females.

STCRP MISSION

- Provide high-quality data to enhance understanding of the biology, requirements and habitats of these endangered species;
- · Inform wise conservation and management decisions;
- Demonstrate professional leadership among scientific peers and students;
- Disseminate information to scientists, conservationists and the general public.



Sea Turtles In Sarasota County

THE OFFICIAL SEASON FOR SEA TURTLES on the Gulf Coast of Florida is May 1 through October 31. With sea turtle populations declining worldwide due to beach development, commercial fishing and other human-related causes, protecting sea turtles and their habitat is crucial to their survival. Out of the seven species of sea turtles, five inhabit the Gulf of Mexico:

- Loggerhead;
- Green;
- Kemp's ridley;
- · Leatherback;
- · Hawksbill.

Sarasota County hosts the highest density of nesting loggerheads on the Gulf Coast of Florida. Green and Kemp's ridley turtles also nest here occastionally. On average, there are 2,500 to 3,000 nests laid in Sarasota County each year.



Federal Protection

SEA TURTLES are protected under the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973 and under Florida statutes. Violations are punishable by stiff fines or imprisonment. Violations include harassing nesting females or hatchlings, disturbing nests and possession of any live or dead turtles, eggs or turtle parts by persons who do not hold the proper legal permits to do so.



Nesting Season

LOGGERHEAD SEA TURTLES mature at 25-30 years of age when they weigh about 250 lbs. They mate during migration to the region where they were born. Once there, females lay four to seven nests at two-week intervals. Nesting takes place at night from May through September. When nesting, a female crawls ashore and uses her rear flippers to dig an egg chamber, into which she deposits ~120 ping-pongball-sized leathery eggs. After covering her nest with sand, she returns to the ocean and her nest is left to incubate on its own. At the end of the season, females return to feeding grounds, where they spend the next two-to-four years.





Turtle Patrol

DURING NESTING SEASON, the STCRP monitors 35 miles of nesting beaches on Longboat Key, Lido Key, Siesta Key, Casey Key and Venice. Trained volunteers walk the beach every morning at dawn from May to October looking for new crawls, checking all existing nests and watching for signs of hatching. Once hatched, nests are inventoried to determine the number of eggs laid and the number of hatchlings that successfully emerged.

Hatching Season

SEA TURTLE NESTS HATCH between June and October, approximately two months after being laid. As in other reptile species, temperature determines the sex of sea turtle hatchlings. Cooler incubation temperatures produce males and warmer temperatures produce females. After emerging from their eggs and absorbing the last of their yolk sacs, the hatchlings collectively work their way to the surface and emerge from their nest at night. On the beach, hatchlings instinctively orient toward the brightest horizon. In a pristine setting, the brightest horizon is over the ocean. Once in the water, the hatchlings start a three-to-six day journey in which they use the energy provided by their yolk sacs to swim to an offshore seaweed line. (This period is called a "swim frenzy.") The seaweed provides hatchlings with food and shelter as they travel with the ocean currents.

